

Chapter Three -- Cousin Dawn Aurora

You never saw anybody in your life like Cousin Dawn Aurora -- unless you knew Cousin Dawn Aurora.

She was born just at sunrise on Mayday, and that's how she got her name. And it just exactly fit. All her life Cousin Dawn Aurora just floated around in a rosy cloud.

"Honey," she'd say in a tone three times as sweet as maple sugar, "you can't control love. It just goes where it wills."

She was one of the older generation, and back as far as I can remember Cousin Dawn Aurora never did anything but look sweet, and paint on china, and sing sad songs like:

And so you have come back again,
Since time at length has set you free,
To offer me again the heart
Whose earliest hopes were bound in me.

A woman's ways, a woman's tongue,
Sowed doubt and anguish in your breast.
You have left me, and my heart is dead.
No sound can e'er disturb its rest.

You have left me, and my heart is dead,
No sound can e'er disturb its rest.

Ah, no, I cannot take your hand:
God never gives us second youth.

But all the tender vows I made,
Were given, dear friend in perfect truth.
The rosy dawn was dewy then,
And now, almost, the sun is set:
And I've tried through all those weary years,
Have tried, though vainly to forget.
And I've tried, through all those weary years,
Have tried, though vainly to forget.

Your hair was like the midnight then,
But now, your locks are touched with snow,
And yet, it is the dear, sweet face,
I loved so fondly years ago.
The face that on a summer day
Bent over me and kissed my brow.
Oh, happy hours of trusting love,
Alas, it is all over now.
Oh, happy hours of trusting love,
Alas, it is all over now.

And now, farewell, for we must part.
I know you never meant me wrong.
God sent this anguish to my heart,
To teach me to be brave and strong.
But through it all, I love you yet,
As friend to friend, Heav'n bless you dear,
And guide you through life's darkened woes,
To where the skies are always clear.

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To where, the skies are always clear.

Cousin Dawn Aurora was about fifty when she died, and I think she must have been about fifty when she was born, too. I can't remember her being any other age, anyway. She was wasp-waisted, and she set it off by wearing shirtwaists and skirts that came up to just under her ribs. Mother said her hair had once been brown, but by the time I came along it was auburn from using sage and sulphur to keep it from turning gray. It came down below her waist when she combed it, which was a perfectly proper thing to do anywhere but on the most public occasions, and she wore it piled high on her head, with tortoise-shell combs.

It was a sentimental journey to walk through a churchyard with Cousin Dawn Aurora. She would coo along like a mourning dove, without ever stopping for a moment.

"Honey," Cousin Dawn Aurora would say, "now there's Hanna Sparks. She wouldn't let Lyddie take a lemon cake over to old Mr. Ronald, and him lyin' there dyin' of cancer of the peter. And look at that poison ivy startin' to grow out of the grave of old Bill Johnson. Now ain't that just so fitten it makes you blush? Law, honey, he was the stingiest ol' man that ever lived. Did I ever tell you about the time he rented Brother Stumbo a field for fifty bushels of corn? an' he knew that hillside wouldn't make that much corn. Brother Stumbo was just a young preacher then, an' he had a wife an' a little baby. He worked hard all summer, and he had a good crop and just lacked a half bushel of makin' enough to pay the rent. An' do you know what that stingy ol' man went an'

did? He could-a said, 'Now, Brother Stumbo, I know you've worked hard an' you can just pay me twenty-five bushels.' Anybody else would've done that. Or he could've just let him keep ten bushels, anyway, or five, or at least just that last half bushel. But you know what that ol' man done? He said, 'Now Brother Stumbo, you're a young man, an' I know you've worked hard this summer. I tell you what I'll do. I just won't ask you to pay me that other half bushel of corn.' That's right, honey. That's just what that ol' man done. You know, honey, a skinflint isn't a man that skins flints. He's a flint that skins men. I don't see how even poison ivy can grow out of such an old flint as that man was.

"Now there's the grave of your mother's sister, Calista, and that other one's Jane. They were the only two in your grandfather's family that didn't live to grow up, and all the rest of them are livin' yet. They were both such sweet little girls, too. Now Calista, she wasn't quite two years old when she died of summer complaint. That second summer. That was what used to carry off the younguns. She was such a sweet little thing, an' she had a fever an' in those days they thought that if you had a fever it'd kill you to drink water. An' she just kept crying, 'Lottle, lottle,' -- she couldn't talk plain -- till Aunt Anne couldn't stand it any more, and she gave her water. If anybody'd known it, they'd a said it was your grandma killed her. Jane was just six years old an' goin' to school when she died, an' she was the brightest little thing you ever saw in your whole life. She died of the flux, from eating too many wild plums. The flux was awful bad that year, an' killed soooo many people.

"Isn't that rose beautiful growin' on Tabitha Pickel's grave?

Honey, I've read the epitaph so often I can tell it to you by heart. It says: 'Sacred to the memory of Tabitha Picklesimer, who went to meet her Lord September eighteenth, eighteen hundred and sixty-nine. She was not unprepared.' You know, honey, ol' Tabitha Pickel had that stone cut for herself ten years before she died. She dreamed the day of her death that long beforehand. An' endurin' the war when the guerrillas came through here, they was mighty rough men, I tell you, honey. An' one of them threatened to kill Tabitha, an' she just laughed at him, an' said, 'I know the day of my death, an' nothin' ain't to kill me afore that day.' An' one of those men tried to shoot her, an' his gun wouldn't go off, an' they just laughed an' rode away. 'All right ol' woman,' one of 'em hollered. 'Live forever, if you want to.' But she didn't want to live forever. She lived till the day she had dreamed about, an' she was a strong, able woman. An' when that day come, she just took to her bed, an' before dark that night she was dead. Now wasn't that the strangest thing?

"That rose is from the stock that your great-grandfather brought across the mountains when he came to Kentucky from Virginia. It was somewhere around the year 1800 that he first rode over and picked his land on Blaine Creek. He went back an' brought his family over to live in a log house, but it wasn't long till he and his slaves had built the house with the big, stone chimney. Henry Clay used to stop there, and he often said there wasn't a house in the world he enjoyed stopping at more than Neri Swetnam's.

"Grandpa Swetnam's not buried here, honey. He lies up on the hillside above the old house, there in the same burial ground with the slaves, and not a stone that has a letter on it to tell where

he lies. Maybe your Cousin Monroe Walter might know where his grave is, but I doubt if anybody else living could. Well, come on honey, and let's go home. We can't stay here all day."

And for all her sweetness and light, when Cousin Dawn Aurora said frog, we knew we had to hop!

Cousin Dawn Aurora sang a lot of songs, like the rest of us, but I think if she had one favorite above all the others, it was one we called, "The Orphan Child". The tune is a beautiful thing, especially when played slow on a good fiddle, but the words try a little bit too hard to be sad.

"Father, oh father," a young child said,
As she crept one night to his lonely bed,
"Father, come go to my room with me.
There three beautiful angels you shall see.

"As I lay there with my half-closed eyes,
I heard a sweet sound from the sparkling skies;
As I lay wond'ring what it had been,
Mother, Mary and Willie came gliding in.

"They gathered around my little bed,
And each laid a hand on my aching head.
The tears they fell from my eyes like pearls,
And they wiped them away with their loose-hung curls."

"A dream! A dream! 'Twas a dream, my child,
For your aching head makes your fancies wild."

"A dream, a dream, oh it never could be,
For dreams never come and talk with me."

Cousin Dawn Aurora was real religious, of course, same as every proper lady of her day, an' sometimes she'd get full of evangelistic fervor an' read us a Psalm or two an' talk to us about our immortal souls an' our immoral ways.

Maybe she did us some good, sometimes; it certainly didn't do us any harm, an' we always listened to her with the respect due our elders -- all but the time she tackled Harry B.

Harry B. was a Stafford and another cousin of ours. Everybody used the initial, because there were two Harry Staffords. The other one was Harry G., mother's brother. The "G" stood for "Gordon", an' I never knew what the "B" stood for. But Uncle Harry used to tell us that "Harry G." stood for "Harry Good", and "Harry B." was for "Harry Bad". Uncle Harry wasn't exactly a saint, but Harry B. scoffed at religion, an' was generally looked on as a mighty good prospect for somebody to save.

One day when Cousin Dawn Aurora was feelin' mighty sanctified, she went to Harry B. and told him the Lord had laid it on her heart to lead him to the fold. Harry B. said politely that if that was so, maybe she'd better do what the Lord said.

Cousin Dawn Aurora sat down with him with her Bible, an' started in to read him the Sermon on the Mount. She was a good reader, an' I guess Harry B. might have enjoyed listening to her. But after she finished, she started in with him just like he'd been a little shirt-tail boy, an' him a man in his twenties.

"Now Harry B., honey," says Cousin Dawn Aurora, "what must you do if a man smites you on one cheek?"

Harry B. had had about all he could take.

"I know what it says there," he told her. "But if anybody was to hit me in the face, by God I'd knock hell out of him."